

The Gallatin County 2008 Senior Needs Assessment:

Where Are We Now and Where Are We Going?

By V. Rackauskas

As both an In-Home Assistant for the elderly, and a student working on my masters in Social Work, I was intrigued when my supervisor suggested to me that I conduct a community needs assessment for seniors in the Gallatin Valley. All of us who work with seniors find ourselves in the “thick of it,” listening, supporting, assisting, trouble-shooting, and advocating on a daily basis. We all experience the problems and enjoy the benefits from a subjective point of view. But it’s nearly impossible for most of us to see the whole picture. So I jumped at the opportunity to create a sketch, at least, of what experiences are like for seniors living in the Gallatin Valley. With support from the Gallatin County Council on Aging, I took on the project in February.

Introduction

Each of us has a distinct perspective. We all approach life in a unique way, a way that is based on our family upbringing, personal experiences, education, studies, travel, profession, beliefs and ideals. We see the world based on who we are. Pose the same question to a doctor, lawyer and social worker, and you will get three very distinct answers. And although each of us takes a unique perspective on the world, it is only one side of the story. It is not a complete picture. So how do we go about finding out the rest of the story?

When I began the 2008 Gallatin County Senior Needs Assessment, my aim was to try to answer three questions- What services do seniors in the

Gallatin Valley value and appreciate? What other services do those seniors need and want? What will seniors in the Valley need in the future? I asked these questions of doctors and social workers, nurses and nursing home administrators, EMTs, librarians and many other service providers, in small and large communities in the valley. Then, most importantly, I went to the real specialists, the seniors themselves, and asked them what they love about Gallatin Valley, what difficulties they have living here, and what they believe they and future seniors will want and need.

Surveying, Interviewing and Analysis

I began with a written survey of 109 senior service providers in the valley, who I felt were my “key informants.” The survey asked them to rate a list of services based on their knowledge of the seniors in their community or town, as excellent to poor, with additional options if they had no knowledge of the service, or their community did not have the service. Other questions dealt with community awareness of senior services, what their greatest concerns were and what services they were most satisfied with. Several questions asked about the future of senior services, including which types of living facilities they had and what facilities and services they expected to need most in the next five years. Finally, key informants were asked what they considered the greatest obstacle to meeting senior needs; responses were lack of funding, lack of leadership, lack of employees, or facilities, or government involvement or policies, or misdirected funding. I interviewed those respondents who wanted to discuss any of these questions or concerns in more detail.

Then I spoke with as many seniors as I could. I gathered a group of five at an assisted living facility, two at a senior housing facility and 10 at a senior center. The people I spoke with were quick to tell me how satisfied they were with their lives, and very reluctant to reveal where they were having difficulty living in their communities.

Also, I began to receive survey responses. With a little reminding, I received more, and with even more encouraging I received enough response to meet my 50% minimum.

And believe it or not, with all of these points of view coming in, what I am getting is a picture of a wonderful valley for seniors to live in. Of the 27 senior services survey recipients were asked to rate, 13 of them were rated excellent or very good, and another 9 services were rated good. That's 80% of services. Among the most highly rated services in all communities surveyed were Meals on Wheels, all of the senior centers, hospice, and physical and occupational therapy services. Furthermore, the lowest scoring services, Mental Health and substance abuse services, are already in the process of being addressed by the community. We are obviously on the right track. Other primary needs that came across in the survey and were echoed by seniors I interviewed were the lack of reliable and varied forms of transportation, grocery home delivery, and assistance with legal questions and Medicare benefits.

This is heartening news -except that, when asked if seniors are aware of all of these services, only 60% responded that they thought they were. In the smaller communities as a whole, only 50% of key informants believed seniors were well informed of services. The seniors I talked with verified this,

stating that seniors who did not belong to the local senior centers probably did not know much about which services were available. Nor did they know where to find out about them. Apparently we've got great services, but we need to work harder to get the word out about them. What was of greatest concern about the future of the valley's seniors? Not surprisingly, the number one response was cost of food and housing, followed by transportation needs. How will seniors continue to access the services offered? How will they continue to preserve their independence? This was closely followed by the lack of caregivers and nursing home beds. In the smaller communities, several respondents cited loneliness as a deep concern. Other concerns across the valley were affordable senior housing, the shortage of personal care assistance and the cost of medical services.

Finally, what are both service providers and seniors themselves most satisfied with in the Gallatin Valley? Overwhelmingly, they are most satisfied with the fact that there are many caring people providing assistance and so many varied opportunities for Gallatin Valley's seniors. As one senior told me, those of us who work with seniors sincerely care about them and it shows. And this is the most important and optimistic opinion of all.

Shortcomings and Further Study Opportunities

It's mandatory that despite the informative results I am finding, that I also admit to the shortcomings of my work. One of the primary weaknesses of my research is the small number of elders that I was able to interview. Ideally, I would have been able to conduct more and larger focus groups with the seniors in all communities, but time was my primary constraint. I must admit, furthermore, that the seniors who were so gracious and friendly in speaking

with me, were not especially willing to “make mountains of molehills,” as one gentleman described my request for a critique of services. Perhaps this is a characteristic of this generation of seniors, or of our valley’s seniors, or of the seniors who were willing to take time out of their day to talk with me. Although I emphasized both the confidentiality of their statements and posed questions in the least critical way I could, I am sure that having more time to spend with the groups would have also given me more information.

Furthermore, I did not succeed in contacting as many service providers and seniors in the smaller communities as I had hoped. Again, time, to travel and meet with more providers, and to follow up on leads on interested seniors would have helped in this regard. There is obviously much more information that can be added to the results of my analysis.

Conclusion

The purpose of an assessment is to identify both the needs, and equally importantly, the assets of the community. The Community Toolbox (<http://ctb.ku.edu>) defines needs as the gap between what a situation is and what it should be, and assets as those things which improve quality of life. Every community has both. I hope my work with the Gallatin Valley Needs Assessment will help provide us with a map of where we are succeeding and where we can go in our continuing effort to make our towns, cities and communities the best they can be for our seniors.

Finally I would like to thank the Gallatin County Council on Aging for this wonderful opportunity to not only meet so many of the committed and talented senior service providers in our valley, but also to see how much we

have to offer and how bright the future looks for the seniors for whom we all care so much.

Feel free to review the quantitative results of the Gallatin Valley Senior Needs Assessment at www.gallatin.mt.gov under Services Directory/Human Services/Senior Services and the Senior Source link. Questions and comments can be sent to vidamontana@aol.com